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AUTHOR Gathercoal, Paul
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ABSTRACT

Students need democratic models operating in their daily lives and opportunities to exercise their democratic rights and responsibilities. From 1995-1997 an action research project studied the effect "Judicious Discipline," a democratic citizenship model for school and classroom management, had on students, educators, and parents. "Judicious Discipline" is the only model for school/classroom management that is based on principles of democracy and operates at the principled level of moral development. Students and educators in two southwest Minnesota schools, an elementary school with 425 students, and a middle school with 300 students participated in the project. Quantitative data were collected through a questionnaire administered to all students in both schools at three separate times throughout the 1995-96 school year. Instruction was by the school principal, counselors, and other resource staff. The importance of conducting democratic class meetings emerged from the action research project findings. A different questionnaire was used to determine stages of social development at which students in various home rooms operated. Two teachers in the middle school conducted democratic class meetings and 10 teachers did not. A comparison of survey results indicated that the two teachers who conducted democratic class meetings generated a class climate that was more aligned with autonomous social development than did the 10 teachers with no meetings. Democratic class meetings have certain key elements that the model calls for, such as determining who can call a meeting, setting ground rules, having the teacher lead the meetings, writing down goals, and not coercing student participation. (Contains 3 tables and 15 references.) (BT)

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Conducting Democratic Class Meetings.

Paul Gathercoal, Ph.D.
Associate Professor & Director,
Educational Technology Specialization
In Curriculum and Instruction
School of Education
California Lutheran University

American Education Research Association
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New Orleans, Louisiana

School Violence and Conflict Programs – Paper Presentation

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Paul Gathercoal

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CONDUCTING DEMOCRATIC CLASS MEETINGS

Paul Gathercoal, Ph.D.
Associate Professor & Director,
Educational Technology Specialization,
In Curriculum and Instruction
School of Education
California Lutheran University

There is much literature advocating that an educator's style of school and classroom management needs to shift from autocratic to democratic approaches (Hill, 1990; McEwan, 1990; Sarason, 1990; Glickman, Allen & Lunsford, 1994; Gathercoal, 1999; McEwan, Gathercoal & Nimmo, 1999; Landau & Gathercoal, 2000). The rationale for this paradigm shift is simple. Students need models from which to learn. Educators delude themselves if they believe students will learn to be responsible citizens in a democratic society by passively learning about democracy in autocratic schools and classrooms. Students need democratic models operating in their daily lives and opportunities to exercise their democratic rights and responsibilities. It is pure fantasy for educators to believe that their students will operate at the higher levels of moral development as a result of their meting out rewards and punishment in hopes of reinforcing "good" behavior and discouraging the "bad." Students need educators who can model appropriate knowledge, dispositions and skills at the principled level of moral development.

This paper emanates from a 1995 through 1997 action research project that studied the effect *Judicious Discipline*, a democratic, citizenship model for school and classroom management, had on students, educators and parents. *Judicious Discipline* is the only model for school and classroom management that is based on principles of democracy and operates at the principled level of moral development (Wolfgang, 1995).

The results of the action research project suggested that when teachers use strategies complementary with the philosophy of *Judicious Discipline* they do much to lead students toward the autonomous stage of social development, as measured by the study's questionnaire. The research indicated that students become more self-directed and are able to take responsibility for learning. They display flexibility in a variety of social situations without demanding conformity of all students. They are able to empathize with others and establish mutual expectations based on respect for themselves and others.

The action research project findings also suggest that teachers need to take the time to teach students about *Judicious Discipline* and individual rights and responsibilities. Teachers who do take the time reap many benefits:

- Their students are more likely to respond on questionnaires that indicate they are operational at the autonomous stage of social development, and as a result,
- Teachers are less likely to feel frustrated and/or experience high levels of work-related stress.
- They are more likely to be respected by others, and
- They will feel a sense of professionalism.
- They will be using management strategies that are legal, ethical, and educationally sound, and
- Their students will be provided with a "language of civility," which offers a common ground for discussing, mediating and reconciling social problems, and

- Their students will use "the language of civility" to advocate for themselves and to solve their own social problems.

Further analysis of the data collected in the study indicates that teachers who conducted democratic class meetings while implementing *Judicious Discipline* tended to benefit more, in terms of peaceful resolution to conflict, than teachers who did not conduct democratic class meetings. This finding emerged in both the quantitative and qualitative data that was collected. As a result, a recommendation was made that the implementation of *Judicious Discipline* works best when teachers concomitantly conduct democratic class meetings.

The action research data indicated that there were certain elements of democratic class meetings that made meetings more successful if teachers practiced them and logistically conducted the meeting with these elements in mind. The purpose of this paper is to share the elements of democratic class meetings that the research data supports as successful strategies. These elements appear at the end of the paper, but first the quantitative research findings are presented.

The Action Research Project

Students and educators in two schools in Southwest Minnesota participated in the project. One school was an Elementary School with approximately 425 students in grades one through five, and the other was a Middle School with approximately 300 sixth grade students. Quantitative data was collected through a questionnaire which was administered to all students in both schools at three separate times throughout the 1995-96 school year. Qualitative data was collected through videotaped interviews with educators and students.

During the month of September, students at both schools were taught about *Judicious Discipline*, a citizenship model for school and classroom management. Instruction began with presentations by the school principal, counselor, and other resource staff, e.g., school psychologists and police liaison officer. After these initial presentations, classroom teachers taught lessons about rights and responsibilities, including the concept of appropriate "time, place and manner." Lesson plans were made available to every classroom teacher, however, it was left to the classroom teacher's discretion as to the amount of time used for these lessons and the amount of follow-up that occurred after the initial presentations.

Throughout the year, various interventions by resource staff occurred in both buildings in order that the faculty and staff be made aware of the components of *Judicious Discipline* and the successful strategies that were being used to implement it in the classroom. As well, faculty, administration, and staff held meetings for the purpose of brainstorming democratic methods and individual strategies for dealing with student behavior. At the Elementary School, a *Judicious Discipline* empowerment group, of interested faculty, administration and staff, met regularly to discuss delights and concerns with its implementation. At the Middle School, discussions occurred on an as needed basis to brainstorm "judicious" responses to specific student behaviors.

Through these discussions, strategies and ideas were developed with teachers who wanted to deal with particular behavior problems, specific to their classroom. Discussions of this nature occurred when teachers indicated that certain students could have effected the results of the classroom survey. The discussion then centered on how the teachers might deal with the behavior problem "judiciously" in their classroom setting, either through class meetings or through private discussions with the students.

The Importance of Democratic Class Meetings

Democratic class meetings provide students with a sense of value and belonging. They are an essential part of the effective operation of **all** *Judicious Discipline* classrooms. Democratic class meetings are needed at all levels of education, as these meetings provide excellent opportunities for developing and discussing goals, expectations, and relationships within the educational setting.

Democratic class meetings work to share power; and as a result, these do much to **avoid power struggles** by providing every student with an opportunity to express their concerns and delights. When students feel that they have some power in the organization and operation of their class, they are less likely to "act out." Class meetings provide "institutionally okay" ways for students to vent their frustrations, anxieties, and celebrations in a fair and equitable manner. When decisions are made in the class meeting, and if there is action to be taken, **students are more likely to participate** because they feel like they were an important part of the decision-making process. Democratic class meetings are opportunities for **teachers to model respect and trust** by actively listening to and valuing their students' ideas.

The importance of conducting democratic class meetings emerged from the Mankato action research throughout the 1995 - 1997 time period. The quantitative support for democratic class meetings was apparent both years through the analysis of student response questionnaires.

A questionnaire developed by *The Social Development Group*, Research Branch of the South Australian Department of Education, and published in their 1980 publication *Developing the Classroom Group*, was used to determine stages of social development at which students in various home rooms operated. The questionnaire differentiates between power and affect relationships through a series of eight true/false questions and places the individual in one of four developmental groups (dependent, rebellion, cohesion, and autonomy).

Student behavior for each developmental stage of social development is described below:

- In **stage 1**, the main issue is dependence. Students are generally dependent and submissive, and do what the teacher says. The students' interaction is mostly through the teacher, so there is low covert interaction among students. there is little disruptive behavior, but some "attention getting." Order is fairly high. anxiety levels high in some students. Some students are bored. Motivation is extrinsic; approval, praise and encouragement from teacher and parent/caregiver(s) is important. There is fear of punishment.
- In **stage 2** the main issue is rebellion. The students test, challenge and try out the teacher. The student group separates into two camps, one in opposition to the teacher, the other seeking to maintain dependent group behavior. Some students challenge or ignore the teacher's efforts to control the class. Noise level tends to be high. trust level among students is low, and aggressive interactions and put downs are common. The rebellious sub-group is extrinsicly motivated by peer group approval, moderated by fear of teacher punishment. The intrinsic motivation is for autonomy, moderated by dependency needs.
- In **stage 3**, the main issue is cohesion. Students are friendly and trusting to each other and the teacher. there is very little disruptive behavior. there is lots of interaction but of an orderly type. They conform to group norms. there is little disagreement, as this is seen as disruptive to the harmony of the group. this inability to handle conflict results in some covert bad feeling. Extrinsic motivation comes from praise and encouragement from peer group and teacher. Breach of class norms brings strong group disapproval.
- Autonomy is the main issue at **stage 4**. Individuals are self-directed, able to seek and give support but function well without it. Students take responsibility for their own learning. there is a high level of interaction. Agreement and discussion are the norm; agreement occurs in the context of disagreement.

  Feelings (positive and negative) are openly expressed. Students work the same with or without the teacher present.

  Disruptive behavior is virtually non-existent. Students show flexibility and adaptability in a variety of learning situations without demanding conformity of all members. They utilize self-awareness and empathy rather than rules to choose behavior. Motivation is mainly intrinsic. Social behavior is based on respect for self and others. Learning is seen as a way of gaining personal competence and joy. (Education Department of South Australia, 1980, p. 31 - 35)

The sixth grade only school is a building housing approximately 300 students and twelve distinct home rooms. Two teachers conducted democratic class meetings throughout the year and ten home room teachers did not. A comparison of survey results indicates that the two teachers who conducted democratic class meetings generated a class climate that was more aligned with autonomous social development than did the ten teachers who did not conduct democratic class meetings.

At the beginning of the year, the two teachers who conducted democratic class meetings had similar results to teachers who did not conduct democratic class meetings. This indicates that the classes were probably similar in their stages of social development at the beginning of the year. The teachers who conducted democratic class meetings and who did not conduct democratic class meetings questionnaire results for September 1995 are presented in Table 1. The reported "N" indicates the number of responses that were given by all students answering at a particular stage of social development for the four constructs (teacher power, student power, student/student relationship, and teacher/student relationship).

TABLE 1. Results of Student Responses to Questionnaires in September

Teachers Who Conducted Democratic Class Meetings
September 1995 Questionnaire Results

Dependent	Rebellion	Cohesive	Autonomous
N = 76: 49%	N = 20: 13%	N = 54: 26%	N = 54: 26%

Teachers Who Did Not Conduct Democratic Class Meetings
September 1995 Questionnaire Results

Dependent	Rebellion	Cohesive	Autonomous
N = 412: 40%	N = 145: 14%	N = 248: 24%	N = 223: 22%

By February, differences in survey results began to emerge and qualitative data indicated that students who were involved in democratic class meetings felt more empowered and felt more of a sense of belonging to the group. The February results indicate that while the school is making good progress in the area of social development, the two teachers who conduct democratic class meetings are making great progress. The teachers who conducted democratic class meetings and who did not conduct democratic class meetings questionnaire results for February 1996 are presented in Table 2. The reported "N" indicates the number of responses that were given by all students answering at a particular stage of social development for the four constructs (teacher power, student power, student/student relationship, and teacher/student relationship).

Paul Gathercoal, Ph.D., California Lutheran University
Thousand Oaks, CA 91360-2787 Ph. (805)493-3021

TABLE 2. Results of Student Responses to Questionnaires in February

Teachers Who Conducted Democratic Class Meetings
February 1996 Questionnaire Results

Dependent	Rebellion	Cohesive	Autonomous
N = 11: 6%	N = 19: 10%	N = 18: 9%	N = 148: 76%

Teachers Who Did Not Conduct Democratic Class Meetings
February 1996 Questionnaire Results

Dependent	Rebellion	Cohesive	Autonomous
N = 170: 17%	N = 224: 23%	N = 193: 20%	N = 399: 40%

The May questionnaire results continue to show that the two teachers who conducted democratic class meetings maintained high level response rate for students' reported social development and the ten teachers who **did not** conduct democratic class meetings tended to score very high in the rebellion stage of social development. The teachers who conducted democratic class meetings and who did not conduct democratic class meetings questionnaire results for May 1996 are presented in Table 3. The reported "N" indicates the number of responses that were given by all students answering at a particular stage of social development for the four constructs (teacher power, student power, student/student relationship, and teacher/student relationship).

TABLE 3. Results of Student Responses to Questionnaires in May

Teachers Who Conducted Democratic Class Meetings
May 1996 Questionnaire Results

Dependent	Rebellion	Cohesive	Autonomous
N = 11: 6%	N = 11: 6%	N = 28: 14%	N = 150: 75%

Teachers Who Did Not Conduct Democratic Class Meetings
May 1996 Questionnaire Results

Dependent	Rebellion	Cohesive	Autonomous
N = 158: 16%	N = 268: 27%	N = 182: 18%	N = 383: 37%

These results support the need for conducting democratic class meetings when implementing *Judicious Discipline*. The elements for conducting democratic class meetings, that follow, were gleaned from interviews with students and teachers who through trial and error found strategies that worked best for them when conducting democratic class meetings.

That being said, it seems strange to start with this statement: There is no "right way" to conduct a democratic class meeting. However, the data indicated that successful democratic class

meetings took many different forms and the "best" organization and structure for any given class will probably emerge as the academic year progresses. Nonetheless, some elements that work well to facilitate and democratize class meetings did emerge as "key elements" for success. The following is a list of key elements that will be helpful for teachers who are organizing and conducting democratic class meetings for the first time.

The Key Elements of Democratic Class Meetings

- **Determine who can call a class meeting and when they should be held (What is a proper time, place, and manner?).** Some teachers allow any student in the class to call a class meeting whenever one is necessary. Other teachers determine a specific time, place, and manner. Both methods and a variety of methods in-between can work well as long as the calling of a class meeting has the effect of giving students a sense of significance and some power and control over what happens in their classroom. The important element is that democratic class meetings will occur and that there is some mechanism for calling a class meeting to order.

- **All students and the teacher should be seated so everyone can see the faces of the others in the class meeting.** How we position ourselves says much about power relationships.
    - To instill a sense of significance and power in the students, **sit in a circle or square shape where everyone can communicate easily with any other person in the class meeting**. The physical environment in the classroom should be as *inclusive* as possible, and students and teachers who sit comfortably in a closed circle shape provide for a feeling of community that encourages positive and productive communication. The more "formal" physical arrangements (sitting in rows) have the effect of excluding students, or allowing students to exclude themselves. This feeling of exclusion may occur for other reasons, e.g., name-calling, or an individual's posture within the circle; but, by sitting in a circle, the physical environment is optimized and communication is amplified.

- **Set the ground rule/expectation that we will never use names during the class meetings.** Using names casts an accusatory finger at the person being named and has the effect of putting that person on the defense. It also causes ill feelings. Negotiate with students not to use class members' names. Ask, "How would you feel if everyone in the class was talking about you?" Most students would feel embarrassed and defensive. Suggest that when talking about problems and behaviors that the class should talk in terms of, "a person who acts in this way..." rather than, "When (Person's Name) acts like..." This protects individuals in the class and allows them to participate in the discussion about behavior and not about personalities.

- **Set the ground rule/expectation that we will stay on the topic and carefully guard any sharing about our families during the class meetings.** The efficiency of any class meeting is mediated by the class' ability to stay on topic and to discuss all agenda items with an open mind. By guarding carefully what is brought to the attention of the meeting and by keeping the topic free of "family concerns" the class meeting is more likely to flow quickly and smoothly.

- **The teacher should lead the class meeting.** Action Research indicates that when teachers hand over the leadership role to students, the class meeting digresses. Many

teachers think having "Class Officers" and empowering them with the administrative power to lead the meeting is "in line" with democratic principles and that the practice leads students to autonomy. In fact, our research findings indicate the opposite. The whole process of deciding and empowering "Class Officers" propagates popularity contests and competition. These contests generate ill feelings and can result in a major break down in community building. There should be one educational leader in the classroom and that is the teacher. The teacher needs to conduct the democratic class meeting.

- **Students should never be coerced to participate in the class meeting.** It is a good idea to set the ground rule that it is okay to "pass" if an individual chooses not to contribute to the discussion.

- **It is a good idea for each student and teacher to have a class meeting journal.** In this journal the teacher and students can write down their thoughts. Pre-school students can record their thoughts in a journal. Often, the younger students will record their thoughts in picture form. This is okay; it is a powerful feeling when students view themselves as writers and readers of their own journal entries.
    - **It is important that the teacher participates by writing in his or her journal.** This sends a strong message to the students that this is important work; so important that the students' writing will be valued along with the teacher's writing.
    - **A good way to begin class meetings is to write in your journal for a few minutes.** This writing can occur at the beginning of class or at the end of class, and it can take place in small groups or be done individually. It is a good idea to vary the format, small groups one meeting, and individually the next.
    - **Give guidelines or categories for writing in the journals and display these guidelines for all to see.** You may want to change the guidelines or categories from week to week. Some guidelines or categories that have worked well for writing are: Concerns, Clarification's, and Delights, **or** Something I'd Like To Talk About, Something I'd Like To Work On, and Things That Are Going Well. Using three categories is a good idea and encouraging everyone to write at least one thing in each category works well. Always ensure that one of the categories allows students to raise issues that are problem areas, another category allows for questions, and the third category encourages celebrations and the acknowledgment of success.
    - **After everyone has had time to write in their journal, assemble in a circle and use the journal entries as the agenda for the democratic class meeting.** Begin by asking, "Does anyone have concerns or clarifications they would like to discuss?" Save the "Delights" for the end of the meeting, they tend to make everyone feel good and do much to build community in the classroom.

- **It is a good idea for the students and the teacher to set and write down the goals they set for themselves after or during the class meeting.** The teacher and students can use their class meeting journal to write down goals that they set for themselves. It is important that individuals set their own goals, no one should ever set a goal for someone else. It's okay to pose possible goals as questions, "What do you think about setting a goal like, ...?" But, to set a goal for someone else again brings about a co-dependent relationship rather than a mentoring relationship.
    - **Writing goals down is important**. Verbalizing goals accomplishes several things. It gives us something to strive for that is in a form we can visualize. It encourages us to take ownership in problem-solving; and it gives us a measuring stick for our personal growth and performance in life. Writing the goal down is important, but sharing the goal with others is another matter.

- **Never direct members of the class to share their goals with others.** If they choose to share their goals, that is fine, but some goals may be more personal than others, and it is not for anyone else to decide what is personal and what is not. For example, one student may write down the goal, "I need to start listening better." If this goal is shared with others, then others may taunt the goal-setter with, "You need to listen better!" and this can cause ill feelings and will not help the goal-setter to make an honest self-assessment or encourage him or her to set more goals in the future. In fact, you may want to warn your students, "It's important to write your goals down (and cite the reasons above as to why it is important), but be careful who you share your goals with and be sure and celebrate when you accomplish the goals you set for yourself."
- **Self-assess the goals individuals have set.** The teacher can ask, "How are we going with the goals we set last meeting?" Without iterating the goal, the teacher and students can report, "I'm doing pretty good" or "I'm having some trouble with my goal." This allows the class to celebrate with those who achieve their goals and offer moral support for those who may not be achieving as much as they think they should. Note that at no time does the person have to state what her or his goal is, they just offer an assessment of their progress. As with other agenda items, the teacher and student should all have the right to "pass" if they do not wish to respond to the question.

Educators may be well advised to include democratic class meetings in their repertoire of teaching strategies when they implement the principles of *Judicious Discipline* in their classrooms and schools. As educators shift from autocratic class management practices to a more democratic style of administration, it serves educators and their students well to have the key elements for conducting democratic class meetings in place. When democratic class meetings are conducted in concert with the practice of *Judicious Discipline*, educators can feel proud that they are truly preparing tomorrow's citizens for living and learning in a democratic, free society.

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